

EDITORIAL

Apparently there are still some people who believe in UFO crashes. There are many things that crash, including aircraft, bits of aircraft, satellites and booster rockets. However, the only objects that crash but were never launched from the surface of the Earth are meteorites. All stories of UFO crashes are distorted accounts of more mundane incidents, or lies and fantasies. No alien spacecraft have crashed, you have my personal guarantee of that.

BRUCE GENTRY, SERIAL FILLER

Martin S. Kottmeyer

It is commonly thought among students of ufology that the first cinematic use of flying saucers occurred in Mikel Conrad's 1950 film *The Flying Saucer*. Nigel Watson quietly corrected that error in his history of UFOs and aliens in film *Seeing and Believing* (Valis, 1993). There is in fact an earlier appearance in a largely forgotten serial from 1949 named *Bruce Gentry - Daredevil of the Skies*.

It was a 15-part serial produced for Columbia by Sam Katzman. It was rooted in a New York Post Syndicate comic strip. It has a completely conventional structure of chases, choreographed fights, abductions, and phony perils. Each segment ends with the hero seemingly killed, but in the next part we see he jumped out of the moving car, plane, or whatever just before the crash without so much as a bruise or limp. The dialogue was always minimal. Facts are given with no emotional reactions or reflection or pause. Romance or poetic touches were luxuries for feature films. This is all action.

The plot concerns Bruce's efforts to find a Doctor Benson who has been abducted by a villain known as 'The Recorder' to force him to work on perfecting his flying saucers. The saucer is to be used as a superweapon in the destruction of the Panama Canal and then against both North and South America leading towards their eventual conquest. Initially there is a mention of 'atomic projectiles that can be sent anywhere in the world', but it does not figure prominently in the action. The saucers simply collide into things like an aerial torpedo. What little technical patter there is consists of references to fuses, detonators, a rare metal called 'platinite', and element 99 which can be extracted from the sands of the mesa where The Recorder's lab and launch cave are based. Just for pedantry's sake, I enjoy adding that Element 99 would eventually be discovered in 1952 and called Einsteinium, but with half-lives of its isotopes lasting only 20 days to 480 days it does not exist naturally on earth.

The flying disc appears in only 4 episodes - 1, 4, 12 and 15 - and three of these appearances use identical footage. The saucer quickly bolts out of a mountain and whistles toward the camera at high speed. It approaches a plane flown by Gentry. The plane's instruments 'go crazy' and begin to smoke forcing him to bail out with his parachute. After he is clear, the plane and saucer collide and explode. The remaining appearance involves the saucer flying towards and over a cabin, but at the last instant it makes a sharp turn and dives into the cabin, blowing it to toothpicks. Fortunately, Bruce and his pals discover an improbably handy trap door mere seconds before the crash and escape without even a splinter.

The saucer is obviously remote-controlled. We see rabbit-ear antennae on the craft and criminals fiddling with equipment in a typical mad scientist laboratory. It has the standard issue spark ladder beloved by all mad scientists. That The Recorder is a bit mad is proven conclusively in the twist ending which reveals The Recorder is actually Doctor Benson and he faked his own abduction so he could be free of government supervision and finish his work.

The saucer's look seems conventional to the extent that it is a domed disc. There is a central

stationary dome or turret with a circular porthole. The rest of the saucer spins rapidly around the centre section. It has a rim and a central black spot on the bottom. It is extraordinary, however, in one delightful aspect. The filmmakers did not use models or trick photography. The saucer is a cartoon drawn over the live action! This same cartoon saucer footage is re-used in the 1950 Columbia serial *Atom Man vs. Superman*, a venue one could call slightly more appropriate. Lex Luthor has harnessed the power of the atom and sends an atomic propelled saucer against a plane bearing Lois and Clark.

Columbia recycle the Gentry saucer footage in their 1952 serial *Blackhawk: Fearless Champion of Freedom*. The saucer is there referred to as a 'robot disc' and is sent out by spies to ram a plane testing a new fuel, element X, which gives out a continual stream of energy 'similar to the atom'. There is no alien involvement. The spies are from 'the old country' and we are told it had been recently taken over by Reds.

The Gentry saucer clearly reflects the beliefs of the period. Like Arnold's defining report, it possesses great speed. It is seen only briefly, zooming toward and past the camera. There is no hint of aliens. The saucers are McGuffins in a spy vs. spy drama hinting at secret government projects and foreign intrigues. We see it in broad daylight rather than at night. Allusions to atomic power are present. Arnold suggested such a connection and so did Project Sign, followed ultimately by ufological pioneer Keyhoe. The manoeuvrability of the Gentry saucer, displayed in the sharp turn dive into the cabin, suggests the influence of the Gorman dogfight. The plane crashes suggest the influence of the Mantell crash of early 1948.

The rod antennae reflect the electronics of the era. Several cases from 1947 mentioned the presence of antennae and Jack LaBous of Bethesda, Maryland included one on his drawing of a 5 July 1947 sighting. (1) The 1952 Monguzzi landing photo had a rod antenna on its craft. Rabbit-ear antennae have been present in so famous a case as the 1966 Swamp Gas Saucer drawing of Dexter, Michigan. Such antennae doubtless looked modern and technical at the time but feel decisively quaint at the turn of the millennium. Alien craft sporting them have to be deemed less than advanced to say the least.

The centre stationary dome has lines and corners that evoke a sense that it is relatively primitive. This has counterparts in early cases like the Oscar Linke landing. (2) Similarly, the circular porthole, if that is what it is, has analogues in such Fifties cases as the Adamski contacts and drawings in the Father Gill encounter. The presumption that saucers should spin can be seen in a fair percentage of cases from 1947. Saucers in recent decades tend to rotate more slowly, when they rotate at all.

Easily the most curious detail is the misbehaviour of the electronics in Gentry's plane as the saucer approached. Such vehicular mayhem tends to be associated with mysterious alien powers in the popular imagination and is not a regular feature of UFO reports till after the Levelland electronic rocket of 1957. Richard Haines, in a review of early UFO cases involving planes, has found only one case for 1947 that involved electronic trouble and it first appears in a 1954 book by Harold Wilkins. (3) Two other cases dated from the 1940s involve electronic failure but they occur in the summer of 1949. Since the Gentry serial was already in production in 1948, the possibility of a basis in actual UFO cases looks remote.

More probably, the electronics failure was a detail taken from earlier action films involving spy vs. spy themes like *Ghost Patrol* (1936) and *Sky Racket* (1937). In these films newly invented rays stop the engines of planes in flight. An alternative interpretation might involve an assumption that atomic energy would cause side effects in electronics. One must however rule out knowledge of EMP, the electromagnetic pulse of nuclear explosions that is known to trip breakers and ruin circuitry. The EMP effect seems to be unknown before high-altitude tests in 1962. The Gentry film itself provides no explicit reason for why the instruments went crazy.

Beyond such issues of cultural collaboration, this first crossover of saucers from lore to film is not much to look at. Any effect it may have had on subsequent saucer lore is negligible. If you've seen other serials, this one is predictable and by the numbers. The characters are quickly forgotten. It has little to recommend it to the video enthusiast except for its landmark status as the earliest cinematic exploitation of the emerging saucer mythos. If you want to be entertained, look elsewhere.

References

1. Bloecher, Ted. *Report on the Wave of 1947*, author, 1967, II-14 - II-16.
2. 'Missing Linke', *Promises and Disappointments*, Nos 3/4, circa October 1996, 17-20.
3. Haines, Richard F. 'A Review of Selected Aerial Phenomenon Sightings from Aircraft from 1942 to 1952', *MUFON 1983 UFO Symposium Proceedings*, 13-44

UFO COMEDY

Nigel Watson

The coveted David Altshul Film and Video Award from Southern Arts was won this year by editor and director Keith Wright. The award gives recognition to original and innovative productions made by film/video makers who live in the Southern Arts region of England. Wright's work *Where's Bingo Betty?* certainly met those requirements as it told the story of Bill Harrison's search for his wife who, he says, was sucked up into a UFO.

The film is a tongue-in-cheek dig at the likes of Arthur C. Clarke's 'mystery' programmes, and in this instance we get reporter Arthur Crudd spending a day with the abductee's husband. The eccentric husband says his Betty was taken away by an object like a large Yorkshire pudding tin.

Wright says that SF and horror had a big impact on him as a child and that he likes the idea of mixing them with other genres. He particularly likes the old 1950s low-budget films which are (usually unintentionally) funny. He likes wringing out the humour of profound ideas or intentions brought (literally) down to earth by their ludicrous reality.

In a previous production, *Aquaoid*, he sent up *The Man from Atlantis* and got the visual effect of water by reflecting it in washing-up bowls. *Where's Bingo Betty?* took only 8 hours to shoot and 2½ weeks to edit, but its comedy of everyday folk encountering the Yorkshire pudding tin in the sky is finely paced and is affectionate towards its characters. He admits there are some darker elements to this 10-minute film so that you feel sorry for the characters, and this type of tonal contrast gives him a lot of satisfaction.

As with British SF film or TV in general, we feel more comfortable about making fun of the genre. Instead of *Star Trek*'s thrusting explorers we get *Red Dwarf*'s men and robot behaving badly. British SF tends to be sceptical, insecure, humorous, and less optimistic about the future. These attitudes are also displayed by British ufologists who are simply puzzled by the gung-ho beliefs of their US counterparts.

LITERARY CRITICISM

I.Q. Hunter (ed.) *Lust in Space: A Review of British Science Fiction Cinema*, Routledge, 1999. £14.99

British science fiction movies have been dismissed as inferior to Hollywood's SF output. The films of the 1950s and 1960s have been regarded as poor imitations of the US product, and their low budgets, bad acting, and poor special effects, made them look even more pathetic. In general British SF has been seen to lack vision and confidence in the genre.

When aliens invaded British SF movies they tended to undermine our traditional values and stereotypes, and we dealt with them in the same way as we dealt with the Nazis. The power of science and Empire slipped away from Britain and more often than not British SF merged into horror film territory.

Most chilling of all there was a whole alien women cycle. Women/aliens invaded the rational 'man/machine' world and brought emotion and sexuality to the laboratory. The fear of women and how to regard them after the Second World War was as challenging as communism or nuclear war. Women could no longer be chained to the domestic sphere or kept under male control. As the 1949 film *The Perfect Woman* makes clear, a robot woman fits the male ideal far better than a real biological woman.

Most of these British alien women films were just a good excuse for juvenile sexual fantasy. In *Devil Girl from Mars* (1954) the female of the title is here to take the strongest Earth men away and use them as sex slaves. As Steve Chibnall notes, the female protagonist, Nyah 'has stepped straight from the pages of a fifties fetich magazine' (p. 63).

By the 1960s and 1970s alien women became more representative of feminist shock troops with few sexual inhibitions. *The Sexplorer* (1975) has a female alien investigate London's Soho sex industry, and by the end of the film she abandons science for pleasure.

The alien woman cycle returns to *The Perfect Woman* with Tobe Hooper's *Lifeforce* (1985). In form the woman fulfils male fantasies but her passion and force 'can destroy worlds if not contained'. Ultimately the female alien is attractive yet if allowed full reign she will destroy our whole

military, political, scientific and social structures. The debauchery of unrestrained female sexual aggression is just too much of a threat to masculinity and the British Establishment.

Ridley Scot's *Alien* (1979) upset gender expectations and boundaries by having a man impregnated and giving birth to an alien. British SF films tried exploiting its success with *Lifeorce*, *Inseminoid* (1980), *Xtro* (1982) and *Split Second* (1991) but they tended to be more conventional in that the alien/feminine represented the monstrous 'other' that had to be restrained or destroyed by masculine force. As Peter Wright puts it, the 'British post-*Alien* intrusion film has expressed a remarkably consistent bourgeois and patriarchal attitude towards women and motherhood' (p. 151).

The essays in *British Science Fiction Cinema* show that there are many riches to be found in British pulp SF movies, and they reflect many social and cultural concerns about class, gender, nationality, fantasy and our origins.

Nigel Watson

LETTER

It is no surprise that Christopher Allan can find identifications for 'one and a half' of the cases cited by Pflock. The problem is that most rational explanations, no less than the ETH, are non-falsifiable. Since there are relatively few multiple witness sightings, they have usually received full treatment from sceptics, with the result that many are now 'multiple explanation' cases. The first that comes to mind is Captain Mantell (variously Venus, a sundog or a high-altitude balloon), but I believe I could find dozens without difficulty. The point is that in such instances, even if one of the explanations is true, then nonetheless false explanations have been published as if they were proven fact. What it comes down to is that both sceptics' and believers' attempts to explain UFO sightings are untestable and therefore ultimately valueless. In fact, it could be argued that no ufology has any merit, except for possible entertainment value.

Having said that, it is possible at least to notice logical fallacies in people's arguments (though this approach is entirely negative). Some time ago Allan tried to explain the Walton case by reference to Adamski: six people signed affidavits saying that Adamski had met a spaceman, so if they could all lie, why shouldn't Walton's six workmates have done the same? The problem here is that with Adamski, no less than Walton, people have asked 'why?' rather than 'how?'. The case has been thought so obviously a hoax that no one has stopped to ask how it was done. Adamski's book implies that the witnesses all saw a spaceship and a man come out of it. However, one of them later wrote that he couldn't really see anything (see Timothy Good, *George Adamski: The Untold Story*, p. 194), which suggests that the witnesses had somehow been fooled. Perhaps they glimpsed Adamski talking to someone a mile away, and were persuaded by him that it was a man from Venus, the book later misleadingly implying that they also saw a UFO. If so, then the case sheds no light on Walton's, where the men all said they saw the craft.

Gareth J. Medway, London

DODGY LITERARY CRITICISM

Tim Matthews has responded angrily to a review by Andrew Dennis of his book *UFO Revelation* (Blandford, £9.99) which appeared in the latest issue of *Fortean Times*. The 'Fortean Rating' given to it is 'Poor' with the comment 'No secrets here - for complete saucerheads only'. Matthews complains that Dennis 'has obviously not read my book but then I'm told it's not unusual for reviewers not to read the books they're supposed to review!' Matthews certainly has a point there. Dennis alleges that he suggests that 'every single unexplained sighting in the sky is or has been the test of a secret military prototype', which anyone who has actually read the book will see to be nonsense. In fact the book is not concerned with UFO sightings in general, only those which could possibly be attributed to the activities of military aircraft.

MAGONIA Monthly Supplement is available on the *Magonia* web site, with printed copies sent to the favoured few. Letters and short articles welcome. Letters will be considered for publication unless otherwise indicated. Please send all contributions to the Editor: John Harney, 27 Enid Wood House, High Street, Bracknell, Berkshire RG12 1LN UK ☎/Fax 01344 482709 Email: harney@harneyj.freemove.co.uk

=====